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THE HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY AND SOME OF THE BUILDINGS STUDIED IN MICHIGAN, INCLUDING GORDON HALL AT DEXTER, MICHIGAN

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Historic American Buildings Survey

The restoration of Williamsburg, Virginia, through the munificence of Mr. John Rockefeller, Jr., focussed attention on the early architecture of the United States and prepared the way for the establishment of the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1933. This was a nation-wide effort to record what is worthy and significant of our architectural heritage from the beginnings of this country to the Civil War,- in many states a rich and much appreciated heritage.

The Survey was inaugurated under the auspices of the National Park Service of the U. S. Department of the Interior, and was conducted under the general direction of the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Institute of Architects, and national historical organizations. It formed part of three emergency programs, beginning with the Civil Works Administration, followed by Federal Emergency Relief, and the Works Progress Administrations. The activity was planned to be a permanent one, and its establishment was followed by a new policy of conservation by the Federal Government, implemented in 1935 by an Act of Congress providing "for the preservation of historic American sites, buildings, objects and antiquities of national significance." The Library of Congress was designated as the repository of collected material. For each State or region a committee of voluntary collaborators and a District Office were appointed, a staff of architects employed, and drafting rooms provided. Squads of men operated simultaneously in the field making measured drawings, sketches, and photographs of designated buildings, and gathering historical data. Graphical data were carefully redrawn in ink on sheets of standard size, and a uniform style of lettering used. Historical sketches were filed with the other documents, the camera making possible a pictorial record of buildings which could not be measured.

There was thus brought together in the Congressional Library a mass of authoritative documents for permanent reference, and in the event of destruction a building could now be reproduced, as has long been possible abroad. At the Library of Congress a master list

of historically and architecturally significant American buildings was made, with a bibliography of each building. In Michigan 18 architects, a photographer, and a stenographer made up the working staff, which decreased as funds and skilled men grew scarce. Two drafting rooms were operated, one of them in Grand Rapids, the other in Detroit, under supervisors who were responsible to the District Officer. The Michigan Advisory Committee for the Survey consisted of the following persons: George G. Booth, Cranbrook; D. Bell Moran, then president of the Detroit Historical Society; George D. Mason, Marcus R. Burrowes, and Wirt C. Rowland, Detroit architects; and Emil Lorch, Chairman. The Chairman helped inspect and select buildings for study and went out with some of the Survey parties, also acting as historian for the project.

American Architecture — Our architecture has varied widely, the country over, with the character and background of the immigrants, the new environment, and the available materials of construction. Spanish, French and English, Dutch, German and Swedish traditions all contributed to evolving a mode of living in the new world and to translating this into architecture. The scattered settlements favored regional customs, techniques of construction, and types of plan and form, such as the Franciscan Mission churches of the Southwest, and the spired places of worship in the East, where for many years the major development of our civilization was to take place. All phases of the American art of building were to be included in the purview of the Survey and all types of buildings were sought.

Along the Atlantic seaboard the primitive and early types were in the course of time followed by a Georgian colonial architecture of great elegance, skilfully designed structures connoting increased comfort and wealth, and reflecting for the most part English taste, until after the Revolution, when American architects, like those of France, England, and Germany, turned to classical art for inspiration. Beginning with Roman forms, preferred by Thomas Jefferson as a designer, the classical movement soon turned to Greek architecture as the purest and most beautiful of sources for public and private buildings. Presently, for church design models, the medieval period was looked to by many, with the result that both the staid Classic and the picturesque Gothic were well established, though in varying degree, before the Civil War. Fostered in the older communities, these persistent styles found their way westward to Michigan, where their interpretation was at times excellent, although often necessarily only fair at the hands of designers and builders lacking first-hand knowledge and training. Many used architectural handbooks, whose publication rapidly increased, illustrating plans, elevations, details of form and construction.

Architecture in Michigan — The fundamental changes which were to affect architectural design in Michigan had been taking place elsewhere before this area was opened to settlement. In 1825 many log houses were still standing at Detroit, which had lost its earliest buildings in the great fire of 1805.

By the time economic conditions made a vigorous construction program possible, classicism had become so well entrenched in the older states, whose leadership the younger ones followed, that it was adopted in Michigan and became the favorite style throughout the 19th century. Rather thin versions of the colonial were replaced by the classical mode. Straightforward plans, simple masses, good proportions, sturdy columns supporting heavy moulded entablatures and pedimental gables, regularly spaced windows and, in general, orderly composition gave dignity and beauty; the white paint brought freshness, and the forms nice shadows. Green blinds and well-placed inside chimneys showed a frank compromise between ancient forms and requirements of the time. The style was so generally used, not only for court houses, churches, and mansions, but also in small dwellings, farm houses, shops, schools, barns, and mills, that for once Michigan towns had a degree of architectural unity. Not again has a common norm so nearly prevailed.

In the fifties the increasing number of Gothic cottages and churches introduced another set of forms; the churches had high-pitched roofs, pointed openings with colored glass windows and tracery, wall buttresses, towers, and pinnacles; the houses echoed many elements of the church, adding ornamental, sawed verge boards to the gables, wood pendants and oriels, slight clustered shafts in the porches. The house plans and masses were irregular, all with a domestic and less formal character which made for increased freedom in design. The number of Gothic examples was however much smaller than those in the classical vein and thus the latter could be more intensively studied by the Survey in Michigan.

Northern Michigan

In no other Michigan community were found so many structures of historical, economic, and architectural interest as on Mackinac Island. There isolation and freedom from commercial development made for preservation of a high percentage of the original buildings. Outstanding are the Fort, the American Fur Company group, and the Presbyterian Chapel. Here are also an early court house, the Mission House, the little Biddle house, the Alexis St. Martin dwelling, associated with Dr. William Beaumont, and other buildings. Of these the following were measured for the Survey: The Fort, with block houses and stone ramparts, the barracks and the Stone Officers Quarters. The latter, begun by the British and completed by the Americans, is Quebec-like outside, with high hip roof and chimneys, small openings; inside the fireplaces are framed by colonial mantels of pilasters and moulded cornices. The Fur Company warehouse, dormitory, and Agent's residence formed an organic group, center of far-flung Astor trade and source of wealth. The Agent's residence, built in 1822, is a center-hall house with colonial entrance, graceful stairs, and moulded mantels, with also many accretions due to its later adaptation to hotel use. The Chapel is a small edition of a New England colonial meeting house with tower and box-pews. An early form of construction of boarding over logs is illustrated by the Biddle dwelling built before the Americans took over. It has recently been presented to the State, as has the St. Martin house.

Southern Michigan

In southern Michigan, the city of Marshall loomed large with Ionic and Doric porticoed hillside mansions, and the Old Marshall Tavern, all Greek classical and all maintained by members of the Brooks family. The new post office and fountain were designed to harmonize with the older structures; these, the new bank, and an old building happily adapted to use as a city hall, together constitute a model achievement in conservation and aesthetic unity.

In Grand Rapids several distinguished residences were measured, among them the Sanford-Wilmarth and Pike places. The latter forms the original part of the Grand Rapids Art Gallery; its Greek Doric columns of the central and symmetrically placed lower porches are all that remains of a former lake shore resort structure.

At Niles there was still erect Paine's little temple-like bank, of wood, which had recently housed a tailor. At Battle Creek a former tavern has become a private house. At Washington, Michigan's largest octangular house was serving as a tavern; it has a remarkable spiral staircase which mounts in the center to roof and cupola. Hartland's former Methodist church is now the Hartland Music Hall. Other early churches of free classical design are still in use at Wayne, Clinton, Dixboro, and Tecumseh. The one-time court house at Buchanan had become the Church of Latter Day Saints; its high columns had decayed below where replacement had been made with cement blocks. Lapeer's fine court house continues in use, although with some incongruous alterations; that at Paw Paw had been moved and adapted to the needs of a boys club. Here, as at Marshall, existed a group of individuals interested in preserving worthy old buildings, a charming house being the Granger-Spicer home of 1839.

Various Other Houses

Interesting houses were photographed at Kalamazoo, Albion, Cambridge Junction, Tipton, and St. Clair, some of those at the latter having a nice colonial flavor. At Sault St. Marie remains the little Johnston house of 1818 (a Johnston daughter became the wife of Henry Schoolcraft, famous author and Indian Agent). Schoolcraft's house has been modernized long ago out of all recognition. Near St. Ignace remain some old log houses of uncertain age. Grass Lake and vicinity are well stocked with old buildings; just west of the town is a rare barn of brick and on the east side the well known sidney Smith house, and the former summer home of Dr. Frank Gunsaulus. All are old and were measured, as was the Godefroi-Nims house, Monroe, in whose old temple front the long ceiling-to-floor windows are not French swinging sashes but operate like sliding doors. Governor Croswell's former house at Adrian had been very successfully restored and adapted to the uses of the Lucy Walcott Burnham Chapter of D.A.R.

Of cupolas, uncommon on Michigan Greek Revival houses, the finest example was found in the story-and-a-half Anderson-Fitzsimmons house, Tecumseh; it has pilaster-framed windows and wall seats, is large enough for a study, and is entered from a trap-door.

Detroit The earliest buildings of 250-year-old Detroit are unfortunately all non-existant; had a few been saved they would form an important part of the record, however simple they may have been. A relic of 1836 is the Doric in-antis entrance of the old First National Bank Building, once at Jefferson and Griswold, which now stands in the garden of the College of Architecture at Ann Arbor.* The frame Sibley house is a somewhat later classical example now serving as the Christ Church Neighborhood House. Next to it is Christ Church, and near by is the Sidney D. Miller residence of stone, both in the Gothic style; just west is the former Roman Catholic Cathedral, the Church of Saints Peter and Paul completed in 1848. In the attic the Survey party discovered architect Francis Letourno's original perspective drawing of the exterior, showing a beautiful tower which was not built. This part of Jefferson Avenue, long one of Detroit's leading residential centers, is dominated by the all-stone tower of Christ Episcopal Church designed by Gordon W. Lloyd, Detroit architect. Its belfry with the chimes, the excellent stone tracery and stained glass windows are attractive elements of a good composition by an architect who had studied Gothic in England. This church, the Fort Street Presbyterian Church, and St. John's Episcopal Church on Woodward Ave., both also Gothic, were all built during the fifties, and are still in use. All are of stone and have high, open, truss-supported slate roofs, and each has a tower, the slender Presbyterian spire being of unusual height and very graceful in outline. Jordan and Jordan were architects of the latter. Of heavier Gothic design is St. Johns; this has an interesting chapel which composes well with the larger unit which it preceded in construction. The entire church and chapel were moved back for the widening of Woodward Avenue.

Fort Wayne when constructed about ninety years ago lay outside of Detroit. With the help of Federal authorities the two original structures were measured; the bastioned walls with brick-vaulted interior passages and gun emplacements are unique for Michigan, as is the college-dormitory-like 3-story Barracks of Georgian design in limestone, one of Michigan's best early structures.

Dearborn Of the Detroit Arsenal at Dearborn, the former Dearbornville, little exists beyond the Officers Quarters of 1833, and the twice rebuilt house of the first commander, Capt. Howard, long the Henry Haigh home. The restrained design of the exterior responded to a refined interior with good details, which has undergone rude changes in adapting the space to purposes of a police station and veterans club. The structure was an integral part of a large quadrangle of which some fragments remain, and which the Dearborn Historical Commission hopes to preserve and perhaps restore. With the help of Federal documents, drawings were made representing the entire Arsenal quadrangle.

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*This was salvaged from wreckers with the aid of Mr. Emory W. Clark, a descendent of one of the bank's officers.The building was used for a time after 1842 as post office and court house.

Washtenaw County — In Washtenaw County several buildings were measured and many photographed. In Ann Arbor the old business center of the north side is of unusual interest,- two groups of colonial brick buildings, with concave plastered cornices, like some in New Castle, Delaware. To American architectural historians, the best known Ann Arbor building is the Judge Wilson George Wahr house, an outstanding example with a Greek Ionic portico of fine proportions, fluted shafts, and well carved capitals of the Attic type. The interior is on an equally high plane in design and well maintained. The house is one of those which should be permanently preserved.

Also measured was the Dr. Tacknor-Campbell house on Packard Rd. The front portion is of split boulders, formerly much used hereabouts; the rear and original part is of oak timbers and clapboards. There is an open connecting shed with various service facilities, and in the old kitchen is the original fireplace with bake-oven and water heater. Roman Doric columns are rare in Michigan, the leading example being in the porch of the Ballard-Breakey house, Ypsilanti, which also has an unusual entrance and a curious stair newel. The Anderson and Kempf houses, Ann Arbor, and the Ladies' Literary Club, Ypsilanti (formerly a residence) are all of the story-and-a-half temple form with square adaptations of the Greek Doric for their porch columns. Cast-iron grilles of graceful honeysuckle pattern are set in the frieze openings of the Kempf house. The little Sinclair house, formerly in north Ann Arbor and occupied for a time by Robert Frost, American poet, was measured; it is now at Greenfield Village, along with the large Smith Tavern from Clinton. The latter has been furnished in the original manner by Mr. Henry Ford and shows a complete early kitchen as well as bar room and ball room. Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor have a few Gothic houses, of which the latter's former Douglas residence is the best known. The Breed house on West Huron, Ann Arbor, is a refurbished illustration, with barn to match. Almost every community and all the roads of Washtenaw Co. have some aarly building: at Manchester, the Hauessler house; at Saline, the Briggs-Burkhart farmhouse and former harness and wagon shop, the old Presbyterian Church has been razed.

Dexter — No Michigan village is more fortunate than Dexter, laid out on a generous scale by Judge Samuel Dexter. Record photographs were made of the pleasing Litchfield house, with 2 low wings and higher center; of the Vint-Steinbach house, unusual for its tri-column porch; and of the old mill, the first unit of which is credited to Judge Dexter and which is now under reconstruction by Henry Ford for further service. In the Village were found a few entrances of a decided colonial character, delicate in scale, with appropriate doors. A fairly large proportion of houses have classical details, even the former blacksmith and wagon shop. What was probably at the outset a one-room office building is now a barber shop.

Measured drawings were made of the Judge's second abode on Huron Street, and of Gordon Hall, the mansion named after his mother, erected just west of Dexter, and long known as the "Judge Dexter

House." He first dwelt in a log house, leaving the Huron Street house when the railroad crept through the yard close to his home. This one had much of the New England colonial about it,- a one-room-deep center hall, with end chimneys and four fireplaces, delicate cornice, and fan-lights in pedimental gables. During an alteration a curious chimney having a spiral flue had been installed and the fireplaces removed. The house had so seriously deteriorated that it was torn down soon after drawings were made of it.

Gordon Hall — Gordon Hall was first occupied in 1844 at the height of the Greek Revival in Michigan, of which it is one of the most impressive and the largest survivor. The high center house fronted by a wide six-columnar Doric porch is flanked by two wings, the larger north wing having a long open shed as an ell. Of the low north and south porches the latter replaced a conservatory. From the front entrance a quarter-mile walk, partially tree-bordered, ran to a stile at the highway. Of the original ten fireplaces, nine remain, some with marble facings and hearths, all with wood mantels of restrained design. There are sliding doors between the two south parlors and, like the other openings of these rooms, they have pilasters and cornices. The doors have long vertical panels echoing the lines of the pilasters. Part of the plaster room-cornices are in place and some of the wall plaster remains. The rooms are high but not very large, averaging 18 feet square, as did those of the Huron Street house.

During the seventies the story-and-a-half wings were raised, that on the north reaching full 2-story height, the south wing becoming a monstrous tower of four stories, of which the upper part has recently been removed. Careless changes years ago caused structural weaknesses. With changing ownerships over the years and periods of vacancy and neglect, weather and vandalism took toll; leaking roofs, frost and broken windows brought falling plaster; failing porch floors and timbers and roof boards weakened foundations, where these were shallow; floors out of level and other defects were much in evidence when repairs began six years ago. All of this absorbed time and funds more needed for other purposes in preparing the place for its proposed use as a house museum and related services. The eastern part of the grounds have during the past few years been used as an athletic field by the Dexter schools, and it is hoped that when completed the entire project will contribute helpfully to the life of the community.

In 1941, when Dexter Village was celebrating the 100th anniversary of the coming of the Michigan Central Railroad, the ground floor of the main house was completely furnished as exactly as circumstances permitted in the manner of the original home. For this purpose was used much of the antique furniture in the collections of the Washtenaw Historical Society, other objects being loaned by Martin Haller and other Ann Arbor firms and individuals, including portraits, books, clocks, andirons, candlesticks, and lamps. Letters describing the original interiors helped give the temporary arrangement a degree of authenticity. The project thus contributed

substantially to Dexter's home-coming, the expense and effort involved being not inconsiderable. About 2500 visitors signed the register during the 3 days, some not being able to get in.

Exhibitions of Survey Material

Survey drawings, and photographs of early Michigan buildings enlarged from Survey pictures, had an initial showing in 1938 during the meetings of Ontario and Michigan historical societies in Detroit. During the two years following they were exhibited in Ann Arbor and throughout the state, eliciting considerable interest. They were then presented to the museum at Fort Mackinac, Mackinac Island, by the J. L. Hudson Company, which had brought the collection together and had circulated it, under the auspices of the Michigan Society of Architects.

The Survey drawings have been of great service in connection with the reconstruction of Gordon Hall, as also for other Michigan projects. The Survey not only produced invaluable records of American architecture but helped to call attention to the desirability of preserving worthy old buildings. In Michigan, the Fort on Mackinac Island has been restored and at present restoration of the American Fur Co. buildings is under way. While some of the fine old places about the state have been destroyed, others are being repaired, in some cases with much care. These homes and public buildings are often the only obvious remaining evidence of the pioneers, and the chief proof of their taste and skill in design and craftsmanship. Knowledge of these values will always have an educational importance, which is being recognized by the establishment of numerous historical centers throughout our country. The young generation will thus be helped to understand that the present does not stand by itself alone, but that much of what we now have and hold dear is deeply rooted in what has gone before.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
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